

September 21, 1983

I do not oppose the establishment of a memorial to Dr. Martin Luther King in the City of Newark. I do oppose the sacrifice of High Street for this purpose. High Street, one of the oldest streets in the City, is an important part of the physical identity and character of Newark. It is the high street that overlooks the core of the City down to the Passaic River. Essex County understood this when it selected the site for its buildings and placed the name "High Street" on the stone pilasters at the foot of the steps of the Hall of Records, assuming permanence of the street.

In the recent past, two men have been memorialized by the renaming of streets. One is a boxer with no greater claim to fame than Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, or many other prize fighters. The other, now deceased, was, for a brief period, a member of the Newark City Council. These men are not of the stature of Dr. King, nor did either make a contribution to this country remotely comparable to his. Those who press to change the name of High Street say they wish to honor Dr. King. But they can find no more significant tribute to him than that which has been given to two men, who, by any standard of comparison, could not qualify to hold his coat or tie his shoelaces. They fail to make a relevant judgment. They fail utterly to distinguish among values. By comparison, this proposal does not honor Dr. King. It demeans him.

I believe that the majority of Newark citizens would like to have a memorial to Dr. King in this city. If you share this belief, then as their elected representatives, it is your obligation to furnish responsible leadership in selecting a dignified, lasting tribute to this great man. I do not believe that the majority of Newark citizens feel that renaming High Street would be such a tribute.

I venture to suggest that one of you, or all of you, sponsor a movement to raise funds for a monument to Martin Luther King. I would hope that this monument would stand on the grounds of Essex County College, across the street from Abraham Lincoln, where, from any place nearby, people could see memorials to two men, who lived one hundred years apart, who believed, and gave their lives for their belief, that this nation was truly conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Two weeks ago I said I would contribute all I could afford to such a memorial. With the sponsorship of this body, many hundreds of citizens would gladly do the same. I hope you will consider this suggestion in the spirit in which it is offered and that you will reject this ordinance. Newark has only one High Street but there are many ways to honor Dr. King. I think I have suggested one that is far more significant than the renaming of any street. We should enhance the image of the City by erecting a monument to Dr. King. We should not destroy a part of its identity and history by eliminating one of the oldest streets.

*R. J. Henderson*